forceps, tongs

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
With the exception of Isa. 6:6, מַלָכָאִים (transliterated by St. Jerome as malcaim; see Sperber 1937-8, 191, 237), a dualis describing an object consisting of two parts (cf. König 1897, § 257a), and a derivative of √מַלָך, is used to denote some utensils specifically intended for servicing the lamps (→ נְר) of the sanctuary lampstand (→ נִיְלָה), of the Tabernacle (Exod. 25:38; 37:23; Num. 4:9), as well as of the Temple of Solomon (1 Kgs 7:49 = 2 Chron. 4:21). They are made of respectively ‘pure gold’ (רְוֹחַ, Exod. 25:38; 37:23) and ‘gold’ (1 Kgs 7:49 = 2 Chron. 4:21). In Exod. 25:38; 37:23 they are mentioned together with ‘firepans’ (→ חֵמֶש plur.), in Num. 4:9 moreover with such things as containers and funnels for the lampstand’s oil (מְשָׂא לְחַלֶּה, cf. also Exod. 30:27; 31:8; 35:14; 39:37).

In Isa. 6:6, where מַלָכָאִים is used for taking and holding a live coal from the incense altar of the Temple, it evidently denotes a light type of tongs or forceps. Elsewhere the term presumably stands for a tool used for servicing the wicks of the lamps, such as adjusting the wicks, holding them while trimming (→ מִפֵּשָׁר), removing old wicks and putting in new ones. In translations, on the assumption that there was more than one pair of tongs, one finds the rendering ‘snuffers’ for מַלָכָאִים too. However, because in 1 Kgs 7:49f. = 2 Chron. 4:21f. מַלָכָאִים and מִפֵּשָׁר are mentioned side by side it is likely that the terms refer to two different utensils. Another proposal is that lids for covering the lamps are meant so that no dirt would fall into the oil (Nachmanides; see Chavel 1973, 460-1). Finally it has been suggested that the מַלָכָאִים refer to pliers to remove the hot lamps from the stand (cf. Holzinger 1900, 126).

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.
3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates

SEMITIC: The √lqḥ is general Semitic and has the basic meaning ‘to grasp, take’, see e.g. Klein, CEDHL, 305; Leslau, CDG, 317; Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 501.

AKKADIAN: The word occurs in the Akkadian of Ugarit (Tawil, ALCBH, 215-6. See below.

UGARITIC: It has been suggested that Ugaritic mqḥm (a dual) means ‘forceps’ or ‘pincers’ (for a survey of opinions see Watson 2002, 923). This is apparently the same word as the Hebrew מַקְחָה, be it that the 1 was assimilated, as is often the case with forms of √lqḥ. In KTU 4.123:21 mqḥm occurs between various containers in the phrase ḫ ṣpt ḫ ṣmqḥm which might be interpreted as ‘and a box with a forceps’ (→ מַקְחָה). KTU 4.127:4 mqḥ mqḥm ‘an excellent forceps’ occurs in broken context. KTU 4.385:3 spl ḫ msʾl ḫ wmqḥm might be rendered ‘a bowl, a flint-knife and a forceps’ – it has been suggested that we are dealing with a physician’s equipment here (Stieglitz 1981).

This term is also attested in syllabic Ugaritic transcription. In a list of bronze tools PRU VI, No. 157:13-14 mentions 1 ma-qɑ-hɑ išāti || 1 ma-qɑ-hɑ me-e ‘1 forceps for fire’ || ‘1 forceps for intestines’ (cf. Hebr. מַקְחָה). Especially the former tallies with the Hebrew use of the tool in Isa. 6:6. Also attested in the Akkadian of Ugarit are two ša la-qɑ išɑti siparri ‘bronze forceps to pick up fire’ (PRU III, 186:38), mentioned just after seven torches.

PUNIC: Punic mlqḥ is a different word, possibly meaning ‘catch-net’ (Krahmalkov, PPD, 645; cf. Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 645: uncertain).

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: See section 6 below.

5. Ancient Versions

◊ and other Greek versions: Exod. 25:38(37) ἐπαρυστήρ sing. according to LSJ, 611: ‘vessel for pouring oil into a lamp’; similarly GELS-L, 165: ‘vessel for pouring oil (into a lamp), funnel’. 1 Kgs. 7:49 (◊ 7:35) ἐπαρυστρίς plur., a neologism with the same mean-
some textual content
7. Illustrations
In Tell el-Amarna, Egypt, forceps designed like human hands have been found that may have been used to pull up lampwicks (ISBE, vol. 4, 558).

8. Archaeological Remarks
[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion
The מַלְפַּחַת denote a pair of tongs or forceps. They were used in the cult to pick up hot coals from the altar (fire was difficult to make) or were used for servicing the wicks of the lamps, such as adjusting them, holding them while trimming (→ מַגֶּהֶמֶת), removing old wicks and putting in new ones. Most ancient versions support this interpretation. A related word in Ugaritic suggests that such forceps were also used for other purposes requiring a delicate instrument to pick up small objects.

10. Bibliography

Last update: 24-03-2011

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